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ABSTRACT

On the basis of published evidence of the negative effects of marital dissolution on homemaking and the implicit negative effects of father absence on mealtime, it was hypothesized that intact families and families with separated parents would differ in aspects of family life associated with food. Of particular interest were the subhypotheses that (1) separated or divorced mothers would be less satisfied with their roles as parents and homemakers; (2) their families' meal patterns would differ from those of intact families, and (3) more television viewing during the evening meal would occur in the absence of a second adult. A total of 18 married and 18 separated or divorced mothers of preschool children participated in the study. Data were collected through an exploratory questionnaire and a record of seven consecutive evening meals. Differences found between groups were relatively small, and results suggest that separated custodial mothers and their families are making practical adaptations to lifestyle change. However, the degree to which members of such families are vulnerable to health and nutritional risks requires further investigation. Specifically, the quality of food, rather than the arrangements concerning the preparation and consumption of meals, merits further attention. Married mothers catered to parental food preferences, while separated mothers emphasized those of the children. Some between-group differences in meal patterns were found. (RH)

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Homemaking Practices and Evening Meals
in Married and Separated Families with
Young Children*

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ABSTRACT

A survey of 18 married and 18 separated or divorced mothers of preschoolers provided data for comparing their roles as homemakers and parents. In married families, the father was frequently absent from evening meals eaten at home, but mothers ate with their children with similar frequency. The two groups were similar in many aspects of homemaking practices, attitudes, and meal patterns. No differences were found in frequency of serving 29 foods from a 36-item food list. Separated and divorced mothers were more likely to report eating problems and to use food as a reward for good behavior with their preschoolers.

KEY WORDS: Preschoolers, Divorce, Homemaking, Evening Meals,
Child Rearing.

Changes in family structure are a natural component of societal change with important implications for the social and physical well-being of all family members (Bernard, 1985). Studies using demographic indices, with various child outcome measures to document the effects of changes in family life, commonly fail to consider the day-to-day interactions which collectively and cumulatively account for apparent departures from the norm.

Given the centrality of food preparation and consumption within the family, the evening meal, which may be the only time when the family comes together, provides an situation for observing families (Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973; Jerome, Peltó & Kandel, 1980; Lewis & Feiring, 1982). The evening meal, which is both a time for nourishment and family interaction, is traditionally prepared by the mother, but meal preparation takes place in the context of numerous household and parenting tasks which may or may not be shared by other family members.

The dynamics of dinnertime are complex (Douglas, 1968), and although the mother is usually responsible for planning and preparation, the father's influence is expressed through his economic contribution (Weiss, 1984), his food preferences (Burt & Hertzler, 1978; Shafer & Bohlen, 1977), his role as disciplinarian (Douglas, 1968; Mills, 1977) and/or as the focus of communication (Lewis & Feiring, 1982). Although there is a literature on fathers' influence on evening meals, there has been little systematic documentation of how meals in families without fathers, specifically due to separation and divorce, differ from those of intact families.

It has been reported that the high levels of stress in some families following marital dissolution have negative effects on family management practices (Buehler & Hogan, 1980), and that divorced mothers are more disorganized homemakers (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1978) who find homemaking less rewarding than married mothers (Weiss, 1979). Divorced mothers have also been reported to have more irregular meal patterns and to eat with their children less frequently than married mothers, (Hetherington, et al., 1978). Their meals have been found to be simpler (Weiss, 1979) and mealtime atmosphere less positive (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

The possibility that either marital dissolution or female employment might compromise nutritional status of preschool children was examined by Bowering and Wynn (1986) using data from the Second National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES II). Although there were no significant differences in average nutrient intakes, boys and girls with separated or divorced mothers showed slightly, but not significantly, more evidence of iron deficiency. Girls from these families were also more likely to have heights below the fifth percentile, but again, the differences were not statistically significant. Maternal employment, like marital status, was not associated with statistically significant differences in nutritional status, but in this case, girls with working mothers were more likely to have weights or weights-for-height above the ninety-fifth percentile.

On the basis of published evidence of the negative effects of marital dissolution on homemaking and the implicit effects of father absence on mealtime, we hypothesized that intact and separated families

would differ in aspects of family life associated with food. An exploratory survey was designed to investigate the hypotheses that separated/divorced mothers would be less satisfied with their roles as parents and homemakers, that their families' meal patterns would differ from those of intact families, and that there would be more television during the evening meal in the absence of a second adult. Direct assessment of childrens' nutritional status was beyond the scope of this study.

METHOD

Subjects

Thirty-six Caucasian women, who had completed highschool and had at least one child between the ages of three and six years, participated in the study. Most were recruited from a university-based day care center and a nursery school, while some respondents were identified through word-of-mouth contact. The oldest child in the 3-6 year age range was designated the target child. Where there was more than one preschooler, we chose the oldest one for purposes of consistency. We focused on preschool children because they are at a critical age for both the influence of the family on developing food habits (Giff, Washbon, & Harrison, 1972) and vulnerability to stresses of parental separation (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Eighteen mothers were married, 11 were divorced and seven were separated. The groups composed of divorced and separated women were combined, based on lack of differences observed in a previous study (Bowering & Wynn, 1986), and will be referred to as separated mothers in order to reflect the salient feature of marital dissolution, i.e.,

father absence from the home. We only studied mothers because women still comprise about ninety percent of the custodial parents of young children (Glick, 1979; Spanier & Thompson, 1984). The study was approved by the Syracuse University Human Subjects Review Committee.

Instruments and Data Analysis

The research instruments included a questionnaire administered by an interviewer and a record of seven consecutive evening meals. Data were collected throughout the school year. For each meal eaten at home, respondents recorded the location of the meal, who was present, and listed the foods consumed by the target child and foods consumed by the rest of the family, if they differed. As with any dietary assessment procedure requiring record keeping, there is the possibility that the need to record, per se, will influence food choice. However, we have no basis for assuming that the effects of possible bias would be different in the two groups.

For coding the evening meal logs, the presence of foods from a 36-item list was recorded. The list was not constructed to measure nutritional quality or adequacy, but included items from typical evening meals that might reflect differences in money available for food, time for preparation or the degree of formality associated with the presence of another, especially male, adult.

When the interviewer collected the evening meal records, a questionnaire was administered in the home. The questionnaire included demographic characteristics, items on food purchasing and preparation, information on help received with household chores and child care, and attitudes about homemaking and child care practices. Both instruments

were developed by the investigators and pre-tested with families of nursery school children. Most of the items had been pre-coded based on responses to a pre-test of the questionnaire, but a few were left open-ended and response categories developed.

Student's t-test was used to compare differences between mean values for separated and married mothers, and the Chi-Square statistic was used to determine the significance of differences in characteristics between the two family groups (SAS Institute, 1982).

RESULTS

Sample Description

The mean ages of the two groups, 33.0 and 32.2 years, for married and separated mothers, respectively, were not significantly different. Age distributions were also similar. Separated mothers had significantly more children, 2.2 vs. 1.6, $t(35) = 2.04$, $p = .05$. In these families, the target preschooler was frequently the youngest child, while in intact families the preschooler often had a younger sibling. There was no significant difference between groups in the distributions of either sex or ages of the target children.

The married mothers had significantly more formal education than separated mothers, with 89 percent having completed college, in contrast to 28 percent of the separated mothers, $\chi^2(1, N = 36) = 13.82$, $p = .0002$. Thirty-three percent of married mothers were either employed or studying full-time, 17 percent were employed or studying part-time, and 50 percent were neither employed nor attending school. In contrast, 83 percent of separated mothers either worked or attended school full-time, 11 percent worked or went to school part time, and only one was neither

employed nor enrolled in school. Because of the significant difference in employment status between married and separated mothers, $\chi^2(2, N = 36) = 10.46, p = .005$, we compared employed and non-employed married women on many of the variables but none of the differences approached statistical significance. No attempt was made to control for the effects of income differences because of the well established decline in economic status associated with separation and divorce (Buehler & Hogan, 1980; Jacobsen (1983).

The survey showed both groups of women to be relatively positive about their lives. Separated mothers were slightly, but not significantly, less satisfied with their lives and with their parenting ability (Table 1), and they were significantly more satisfied with where they lived $\chi^2(3, N = 36) = 7.66, p = .05$.

 Insert Table 1 about here

Homemaking Responsibilities

Mothers in both groups were asked to indicate the person with the major responsibility for a series of household tasks. Table 2 shows that while married mothers received help from their spouses, shopping and evening meal preparation were primarily their own responsibility. In fact, the evening meal preparation category was the only one for which the two groups did not differ significantly. Thus, even in many two-earner intact families with young children, dinner preparation remained the mother's responsibility. Housecleaning was the major responsibility of 61 percent of married and 78 percent of separated

mothers. The mean number of hours per week spent on this task (married = 4.6, separated = 5.3) was not significantly different. Both groups reported that the looks of their homes were important (83 percent of married, 89 percent of single), but in each group, fewer reported being satisfied with the actual appearance of their homes (50 percent of married, 67 percent of single).

 Insert Table 2 about here

Married and separated mothers were alike in other aspects of homemaking. They gave similar responses to questions on frequency and times for grocery shopping, and use of lists, coupons and specials. Both groups frequently shopped with their preschoolers and had neutral-to-slightly positive attitudes about this task. When asked to rank four factors determining their meal planning and food selection, both groups were similar in placing items in the following descending order: nutrition, cost and family's likes (equal ranking), and ease of preparation. In response to questions about the relative importance of various family members' preferences, married mothers ranked their own and their husbands' likes equally, and ahead of their children's preferences, $\chi^2(2, N = 34) = 9.31, p = .0095$. The majority of separated mothers, however, placed their children's preferences ahead of their own, $\chi^2(2, N = 34) = 18.1, p = .0001$.

Evening Mealtime at Home

The percentage of times that families ate the evening meal at home together was 74 percent for intact families and 88 percent for separated

families but these differences were not statistically significant. The father was present for all evening meals eaten at home in only 44 percent of the intact families, and was home for fewer than three meals in 17 percent of these families. In contrast, mothers ate with their preschoolers for 92 percent and 87 percent of the evening meals, respectively, in married and separated families. Adult guests were present for the evening meal 15 percent of the time in married families and 20 percent of the time in separated families. Forty one percent of adult guests in married families were male compared to 36 percent of adult guests in separated families. There were no differences between the two groups with respect to the room in which the meal was eaten or in preparation of special food for the target child.

A major goal of this investigation was to compare the composition of evening meals to see if there were differences between the two groups in foods served to the preschoolers. The data in Table 3 are reported as the percentage of evening meals eaten at home at which the food item was served to the target child. Food items have been grouped according to whether they are considered primarily as sources of protein or starch or whether they were vegetables/fruit or other foods (mainly desserts). There were no statistically significant differences in the frequency of appearance of 29 of the 36 food items. Except for macaroni and cheese and fried potatoes, which were served more frequently in separated families, possibly in response to children's food preferences, the significant differences were due to more frequent appearance of a food at the evening meal of intact families. These included green vegetables, rice, cheese (except as macaroni and cheese), chicken, and citrus fruit.

 Insert Table 3 about here

Frequency and Location of Eating Out

During the week that evening logs were kept, both groups ate out more frequently than indicated by their estimates of usual practices. During this week, separated families ate out nearly twice as often (1.5 times) as married families (0.8 times), but this difference did not reach statistical significance. There was, however, a significant difference in where eaten away from home during this week were eaten. In married families, 38 percent of the meals eaten out were eaten in restaurants compared to 22 percent for separated families. Separated families were more likely to eat with family or friends or at school or church social functions $\chi^2 (2, N = 40) = 6.4, p = .04$.

The response to the questionnaire item on the usual frequency of eating away from home was 1.4 and 2.9 times per month, respectively, for married and separated families, but these differences were not significantly different. When asked about the types of restaurants usually frequented, married families were more likely (67 percent of times) than separated families (7 percent of times) to eat in a restaurant with waitress service rather than a fast-food or cafeteria-type restaurant $\chi^2 (1, N = 26) = 10.11, p = .0015$.

Interactions with Children

Concern with food issues in relation to the target child was assessed in several ways. To evaluate the importance mothers placed on eating with the child, they were asked to choose between eating together

and engaging in another activity together. For both groups, reading to the child and playing together were more important than eating together.

Feeding problems were studied with an adaptation of the list of mothers' concerns developed by Eppright, Fox, Fryer, Lamkin & Vivian (1969). Table 4 gives the percentage of mothers reporting each problem. Except for "poor table manners," which were reported more frequently by married mothers, eating behavior problems were reported more frequently by separated mothers. However, statistically significant differences appeared only in the category "drinks too much soda." Although Eppright and her coworkers (1969) did not distinguish between one- and two-parent families, the degree of concern about feeding problems in the two studies was similar.

Insert Table 4 about here

The two groups differed in their responses to the question "how do you reward your child for good behavior?" This was an open-ended question and responses were later categorized as food-related or non-food-related. Significantly more separated mothers (35 percent vs. 6 percent) used food as a reward, $\chi^2(1, N = 35) = 4.83, p = .028$.

The hypothesis that children from separated families would watch more television during the evening meal was not supported. Although more children in separated families (28 percent vs. 6 percent) watched television during the evening meal, these differences were not statistically significant. However, significantly more children (72 percent vs. 28 percent) from separated families watched television after the evening meal, $\chi^2(1, N = 36) = 7.11, p = .008$ (Table 5).

Insert Table 5 about here

DISCUSSION

This research was undertaken to examine how mothers of preschool children in both separated and intact families meet the social and nutritional demands of the family evening meal and its significance in their schemes of parenting. It appears within our limited data, that it is the food itself, rather than the arrangements surrounding the preparation and consumption of meals, which merits attention.

There were few differences in shopping practices and meal preparation in the two types of families. Even in intact families, where there was some sharing of household tasks, responsibility for the evening meal rested with the mother. It was interesting to discover, however, that the sharing of the evening meal by the whole family no longer appears to have the special significance it has had traditionally (Douglas, 1968; Dreyer & Dreyer, 1973), given the frequency that fathers were absent from the evening meal in married households. As separated families adapt to a single-parent lifestyle, they are more likely to share evening meals with guests to make up for the absence of another adult at the dinner table. This did not seem to be done for the benefit of the child for, in fact, separated mothers, like married mothers, attached less importance to eating the evening meal with their child compared to engaging in other activities together. That there were no differences between the two groups with respect to the room in which the meal was eaten, suggests that the formality of the meal was not a

distinguishing feature, however, children's poor table manners appeared to be more of a concern to married families than separated families which suggests the contrary.

The hypothesis that the composition of the evening meal would differ between the two kinds of households was only partially supported. First, married mothers catered to parental food preferences, while separated mothers placed more emphasis on their children's preferences when planning meals. The empirical literature on the effects of marital dissolution typically portrays custodial mothers as being less attentive to their children, e.g. having more irregular meals and often not eating with their children (Hetherington et al., 1978) or neglecting to prepare meals, especially breakfast, for them (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Second, there were some differences in meal patterns between the two family groups, but it is premature to say very much about the nutritional implications of the differences. Although the child's food preferences were not given the same consideration by married mothers as they were by separated mothers, there were no differences in providing special foods for the child. Because separated mothers were significantly more likely to use food as a reward for good behavior, they may be more willing to follow the dictates of their child's food preferences to avoid dinnertime hassles both at home and when eating out. Discipline around the issue of table manners was less likely to occur in separated families and may be less necessary in the informal atmosphere of fast-food restaurants where there is less waiting and where the menus often cater to children's preferences. Because it is likely that separated mothers and their children eat out as a form of

socialization, a need which may be felt less strongly in intact families, their lower incomes as much as any other factor may dictate the choice of a fast food restaurant. It is tempting to suggest that young children from separated families, who eat more meals in fast-food restaurants and home meals with fewer fruits and vegetables, factors which can be linked to higher fat and lower fiber intakes, are at greater nutritional risk, but more definitive data are required.

When Hetherington, Cox & Cox (1978) and Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) conducted their longitudinal studies, divorce carried a much greater stigma and single-parent, mother-headed families were considered something of an aberration (Hoffman, 1982). Today, divorced mothers and their families receive more societal sanctions (Blake, 1982) and as more women with young children enter the labor force, and other traditional distinctions between separated and intact families become eroded, it becomes increasingly difficult to isolate the effects of marital dissolution (Hoffman, 1982). When one tries to reconcile meal pattern differences with increased demands on mothers and the absence of fathers, it becomes apparent that there are numerous other factors besides single-parenthood determining what children actually eat.

Both this study with limited sample size, and the analysis of the NHANES data, which had the advantage of a large sample from which to generalize, encountered similar problems in identifying families which differed only in mothers' marital status. For both the Syracuse survey and our analysis of the NHANES data (Bowering and Wynn, 1986), we selected Caucasian women with at least a highschool education to represent women who make up much of the "new poor" population resulting

from a substantial loss of income after divorce or separation (Beuhler and Hogan, 1980; Jacobsen, 1983). Although all women in the Syracuse study met the selection criteria for ethnicity and education, and had the same mean age and age distribution, separated women had larger families and older children, and less college education. These observations suggest that they had married younger and/or had children earlier, while the married women had either obtained more or completed their education before raising a family.

The effects of income differences (which we did not attempt to determine because we knew they would be substantial) on food choices are difficult to assess. Neither group of women stated that cost was the major factor in choosing foods for their families and there was no difference in the frequency that cost limited food purchases. There is no reason to assume that ideologies toward food associated with a middle class standard of living would disappear after separation or divorce; therefore, we might expect the effects of the often substantial decline in income to be manifested in household expenses other than food. If so, the differences in food intake patterns between the two kinds of families are probably due to factors other than economics, such as the composition of the group eating together, where they are eating, and their food preferences.

The difficulties in isolating marital status as a single variable, and the fact that some married mothers were employed outside the home while others were not, should not be viewed as obstacles to further research on family food choice and mealtime environment. Study of the arrangements for the preparation and consumption of food, and the nature

of the foods consumed, provides a new dimension for exploring the variations in family lifestyles. It seems important that future research examine the differences between families with older children, and look at single-parent families headed by custodial fathers. The fact that numbers of such families is increasing (Luepnitz, 1982) should make the task of identifying a sample somewhat easier than it has been.

In summary, the relatively small differences between separated and intact families suggests that, despite pressures of time, work commitments and financial constraints, separated custodial mothers and their families are making practical adaptations to lifestyle change, but the degree to which they are vulnerable to health and nutritional risks requires continuing investigation.

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Table 1.
Responses to Questions on Life Satisfaction

Question and answer categories	Married Mothers (n=18)	Separated Mothers (n=18)	χ^2	p
"In general, how would you say things are going for you ?"	%	%		
Not well	0	6		
Acceptable	53	77		
Very well	47	17	4.33	.114
"Compared to other women you know, how would you say your day-to-day life is ?"				
Worse	6	17		
Similar	28	28		
Better	66	55	1.18	.554
"How satisfied are you with your way of life ?"				
Very unsatisfied	6	0		
Unsatisfied	0	22		
Satisfied	72	61		
Very satisfied	22	17	5.13	.150
"How satisfied are you with your parenting ability ?"				
Very unsatisfied	0	0		
Unsatisfied	11	0		
Satisfied	67	78		
Very satisfied	22	22	2.15	.340
"How satisfied are you with where you live?"				
Very unsatisfied	17	6		
Unsatisfied	0	11		
Satisfied	77	50		
Very satisfied	6	33	7.66	.054

Table 2.
Comparison of Homemaking Responsibilities in Married and Separated Families

Area of Responsibility	Married Mothers (n =18)	Separated Mothers (n=18)	χ^2	p
Percentage of mothers with major responsibility ^a				
Evening meal preparation ^b	78	100	4.50	.105
Grocery shopping ^b	67	100	7.20	.027
Housecleaning	61	78	11.36	.003
Child care	61	100	8.69	.003
Laundry	56	89	11.38	.009
Breakfast preparation	39	89	16.52	.002
Washing evening dishes	28	94	20.54	.0001
Child discipline	28	94	16.89	.0002
Household finances	22	94	23.05	.0001
Household repairs	11	72	23.06	.0001
Car maintenance	11	72	20.07	.0001

^a Choice of responses included self, husband, share with husband, other person, share with other person.

^b Two married mothers did none of the evening meal preparation or grocery shopping.

Table 3.
Frequency of Foods Appearing at the Evening Meal

Food Item	Married Families (n=18)	Separated Families (n=18)	t	p
<u>Protein Sources:</u>				
Beef - ground*	18.9	24.6	0.78	0.4
Beef - meatloaf	3.1	2.8	0.12	0.9
Beef - steak/roast	3.4	6.8	1.04	0.3
Beef - other*	3.9	3.3	0.19	0.8
Chicken	22.5	9.8	3.29	0.002
Turkey	5.1	0	2.05	0.05
Fish (excl. tuna)	6.4	6.5	0.04	0.9
Tunafish	2.9	4.8	0.54	0.6
Hotdogs	5.1	9.7	1.35	0.18
Ham	3.7	1.7	0.81	0.4
Porkchops	1.7	1.9	0.10	0.9
Pork - other	3.2	4.3	0.37	0.7
Other meat*	8.5	2.5	1.48	0.15
Legumes (beans)	4.6	10.9	1.24	0.2
Eggs	3.3	2.0	0.61	0.5
Cheese*	23.5	8.6	2.83	0.008
Peanut Butter	0.8	2.8	1.17	0.2
Yogurt	4.0	0	1.59	0.12
<u>Mixtures of protein and starch:</u>				
Spaghetti	5.3	8.9	0.90	0.4
Macaroni and cheese	0.9	7.7	2.16	0.04
Pizza	2.6	6.9	1.24	0.2
<u>Starch:</u>				
Rice	25.8	9.5	2.63	0.013
Pasta*	12.8	7.4	1.02	0.3
Potatoes - fried	2.6	11.5	2.19	0.04
Potatoes - other	11.5	13.5	0.47	0.6

Table 3 (continued):

Vegetables/Fruit:

Green vegetables	40.5	16.9	3.31	0.003
Green salad	24.1	14.2	1.32	0.19
Yellow vegetables ^a	16.1	16.2	0.004	0.9
Other vegetables ^a	16.7	8.9	1.28	0.2
Fruit (not citrus)	22.4	14.1	1.21	0.2
Fruit (citrus) ^b	11.5	1.7	2.76	0.01

Other:

Cake, cookies, pie	7.3	12.2	1.05	0.3
Ice cream	10.5	3.8	0.66	0.14
Potato chips	0.9	2.0	0.66	0.5
Soup	12.5	6.8	1.17	0.2
Sandwiches	8.3	9.4	0.24	0.8

- ^a Includes chili, sloppy joes, tacos
- ^b Includes stew, ribs
- ^c Includes lamb, organ meats, game
- ^d Macaroni and cheese listed separately
- ^e Spaghetti listed separately
- ^f Includes corn
- ^g Tomatoes not included in any list
- ^h Excluding juice/fruit drinks

Table 4.
Mothers' Concerns with Childrens' Eating Behavior

Child's eating behavior	Married Mothers (n=18)	Separated Mothers (n=18)	χ^2	p value
% indicating problem*				
Has poor table manners	50	22	3.01	.082
Dawdles with food	44	50	.11	.738
Eats too many snacks	28	56	2.86	.091
Eats too few vegetables	28	44	1.08	.297
Eats too much candy	22	39	1.18	.277
Makes a mess	22	33	.55	.456
Has a poor appetite	17	44	3.27	.070
Drinks too little milk	17	39	2.21	.138
Chooses limited variety	11	28	1.59	.206
Eats too much food	11	6	.36	.546
Eats too little fruit	6	22	2.09	.148
Drinks too much milk	6	0	1.03	.310
Drinks too much soda	0	33	7.20	.007

* The questionnaire asked respondents to indicate whether a problem was major or minor, but responses were combined for this table because level of significance was not affected.

Table 5.
Times at which Preschool Children Watched Television

Times	Married Families (n=18)	Separated Families (n=18)	χ^2	p value
% responding yes				
Morning	50	72	1.87	.17
Afternoon	33	33	0	1.0
Before evening meal	39	39	0	1.0
During evening meal	6	22	2.09	.15
After evening meal	28	72	7.11	.008